

important reading for scholars of Africa, France, and its empire, transnational history, slavery, intellectual history, human rights, and citizenship.

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## MUSLIM INTERPRETERS IN COLONIAL SENEGAL

*Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850–1920: Mediations of Knowledge and Power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley.*

By Tamba M'Bayo.

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. xxvii + 205. \$85.00, hardback (ISBN: 978-1-4985-0998-5).

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**Key Words:** Islam, colonial intermediaries, colonialism, Senegal.

This book's protagonists are Muslim interpreters who worked for colonial administrators in Saint Louis, Senegal, during a time of French territorial expansion and intensifying conflict with local rulers (c. 1850–1920). As previous studies have shown, interpreters and other intermediaries carried out complex work as cultural brokers and mediators between Europeans and other Africans.<sup>1</sup> They exercised considerable power to shape not only decisions made on both sides, but also to produce knowledge about Africans in colonial contexts.

M'Bayo's goal is to contribute a full-length, empirically grounded study of interpreters — a group largely neglected in academic literature and plagued by a reputation for dishonesty (largely due to the duplicitous interpreter characters in Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *The Fortunes of Wangrin*). M'Bayo's study illuminates the complexity of the interpreters' positions. Neither collaborators nor resisters, he argues, Muslim interpreters in French colonial Senegal reveal a paradox: 'while employed by a French colonizing regime they not only looked after the interests of their local community, but also strived to maintain some degree of autonomy' (1). The book complements David Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation* (2000), which covers roughly the same geographical and temporal space and similarly focuses on the agency of Muslims who forged relations of accommodation with the French. But while Robinson's principal subjects are prominent Sufi leaders such as the founder of the Muride brotherhood, Amadou Bamba, M'Bayo focuses exclusively on the interpreter corps.

Chapter One reconstructs the biographies of some of the administration's most influential Muslim interpreters: Hamat Ndiaye Anne (1813–1879), Bou El Mogdad Seck (1826–1880), his son Mahmadou Seck (1867–1943), and Mambaye Fara Biram Lô (1869–1926). These portraits are drawn primarily from sources generated by and

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, B. N. Lawrance, E. L. Osborn, and R. S. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African employees in the making of colonial Africa* (Madison, WI, 2006).

addressed to the colonial administration — such as personnel files, correspondence, and petitions — complemented, in some cases, by interviews with the interpreters' descendants. Anne and the two Secks receive the most attention. As learned members of prominent Muslim families, they were community leaders in their own right and not simply interpreters for the French. Anne and Bou El Mogdad, for example, helped rally Muslims to petition the administration to establish a Muslim tribunal in Saint Louis in the 1840s, and both officials also served as *qadis*, or judges, once the court was established in 1857. The fourth interpreter considered here, Biram Lô, was possibly of slave origins and worked his way up in the interpreter corps after receiving a French education.

The diversity of the interpreter corps, despite their common identity as Muslims, is stressed in Chapter Two. Here M'Bayo considers a randomly chosen group of 'inconspicuous interpreters' at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Although fragmentary, the biographies of these interpreters illustrate the multiple paths that could be accessed to become an interpreter.

In Chapters Three through Five, M'Bayo sets aside biography and proceeds thematically and chronologically. Chapter Three examines the development of an indigenous interpreter corps in Saint Louis, largely due to reforms initiated by Governor Louis Faidherbe (1854–1865). These initiatives formalized interpreters' conditions of service, transformed the School of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters into a training ground for indigenous intermediaries, and created the Muslim Tribunal in Saint Louis in 1857. Such structures, M'Bayo argues, paved the way for France to emerge as a 'Muslim power' in West Africa by the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Four considers the 1850s through 1880s, when the administration's desire to extend its sphere of control beyond Saint Louis brought them into conflict with Moors in Trarza, the *jihad* leader al-Hajj Umar Tal, and the polities of Walo and Cayor. Chapter Five considers French attempts after 1880 to establish control over what is now Mauritania. M'Bayo successfully demonstrates how interpreters acted as mediators, disseminators of knowledge, and cultural brokers in each situation, although at times, the detailed narratives of events threaten to overwhelm the interpreters' stories.

While M'Bayo thoroughly mines the colonial administration's archive, one wishes he had delved more deeply into sources that reflect the multiple linguistic, social, and cultural worlds in which colonial Muslim interpreters moved. For example, M'Bayo mentions that interpreter Mahmadou Seck 'cultivated impressive literary skills, particularly in writing poems and letters' and he also references Amar Samb's (1977) overview (and French translation) of some of Seck's Arabic poetic compositions (47).<sup>2</sup> By relegating to the footnotes further discussion of Seck's prominence as an Arabophone writer, however, M'Bayo misses an important opportunity to crack open the narrow window on Seck provided by the colonial archive (58–9). I imagine that more exploration of the Arabic sources (including those that have been translated or summarized in European languages) would have yielded a fuller picture of some of the interpreters, their networks, and their significance in social worlds beyond the French sphere (see, for example, Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem's essay that employs Hassaniya oral and written sources to paint a portrait of the

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2 A. Samb, *Essai sur la contribution Sénégal à la littérature d'expression arabe* (Dakar, 1972).

Seck family).<sup>3</sup> I mention this perspective, not so much as a criticism of M'Bayo's book, but to highlight the continued importance, when writing histories of Africa's Muslim societies, of seeking out and integrating sources in Arabic and *ajami* where they exist.

With this book, M'Bayo has made a distinctive and solid contribution to the historiography of intermediaries in colonial Africa; it should inspire future studies of colonial interpreters in other contexts.

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## FROM EMPIRES TO NGOs IN THE WEST AFRICAN SAHEL

*From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality.*

By Gregory Mann.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 281. \$103.00, hardback (ISBN 978-1-107-01654-5); \$35.99, paperback (ISBN 978-1-107-60252-6); \$29.00, ebook (ISBN 9781316190609).

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Gregory Mann has written a compelling new history of the emergence of international aid and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the governance of countries that comprise the Sahelian region of West Africa. Rather than see the origins of these ubiquitous features of much of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa in the neoliberal turn brought about by debt and structural adjustment in the 1980s, Mann recasts the story both chronologically and ideologically, by locating it in an earlier time period and to left-leaning politics. Using Mali as the principle focus, Mann suggests that Sahelian anticolonial political movements and post colonial states were far from weak, 'neocolonial' regimes incapable or unwilling to make a break with France. In the case of Mali, the political party that brought Mali to independence in 1960, *l'Union soudanaise-Rassemblement démocratique africain* (US-RDA), embarked on a quite radical and aggressive program of transforming Malian society in order to make way for a hoped-for rural democracy, and in establishing its independence from France by closing all French military bases on its territory and creating a Malian currency.

While it is not quite right to call these projects failures, for, as Mann shows, they continue to animate intellectual and political life in the region even today, they did not achieve their aims. When the region was hit by drought in 1973, the Malian military regime of Moussa Traoré that had overthrown the regime of Modibo Keita in 1968 was not able to meet the needs of people in the most affected regions. This provided an opening for international aid organizations who attempted to offer relief to famine victims. Some

3 Z. O. Ahmed Salem, 'Archéologie d'un espace public délocalisé: Les Maures et Saint Louis à travers les âges', in Z. O. Ahmed Salem (ed.), *Les Trajectoires d'un Etat-frontière: Espaces, évolution politique et transformations sociales en Mauritanie* (Dakar, 2004), 141–79.